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ABSTRACT

This document presents the standards for social work practice with adolescent clients created by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The standards are designed to guide social workers in a variety of settings as they help adolescents become competent and productive adults. The 12 standards are presented and interpreted. Standard 1 focuses on knowledge and understanding of adolescent development; standard 2 concerns assessing and meeting the needs of adolescents. Standard 3 focuses on knowledge and understanding of family dynamics. Standard 4 concerns the development and maintenance of culturally competent service delivery. Standard 5 deals with the legal, regulatory, and administrative requirements and resources for youths and their families. Standard 6 focuses on empowerment of adolescents. Standard 7 concerns interprofessional and interagency cooperation. Standard 8 centers of multidisciplinary case consultation across agencies. Standard 9 concerns confidentiality. Standard 10 focuses on the work environment, agency policies and practices with clients, and professional development. Standards 11 and 12 are for administrators of youth services agencies. The document concludes with a summary of major principles from the NASW Code of Ethics. (NB)

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NASW standards for the practice of social work with adolescents

CG 033 177

NASW PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Code of Ethics

Standards for the Classification of Social Work Practice

Standards for Continuing Professional Education

Standards for the Practice of Clinical Social Work

Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Adolescents

Standards of Practice for Social Work Mediators

Standards for School Social Work Services

Standards for Social Work Case Management

Standards for Social Work in Health Care Settings

Standards for Social Work Personnel Practices

Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection

Standards for Social Work Services in
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Clinical Indicators for Social Work and Psychosocial
Services in the Acute Psychiatric Hospital

Clinical Indicators for Social Work and Psychosocial
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Clinical Indicators for Social Work and Psychosocial
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NASW standards for the practice of social work with adolescents

Prepared by the Social Work with Adolescents Standards Work Group

Approved by the NASW Board of Directors, April 1993

NASW

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NASW Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Adolescents

Preamble

The many social problems that face our youths have increased the complexity of helping them cope. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) believes that it is time to develop standards for social work practice with adolescents to serve as a guide for social workers in their many roles as they work with youths.

These standards address the ways in which social workers must work with all adolescents to help them deal with their problems. NASW recognizes that because of budget, resource, and personnel shortages, these standards represent goals to strive for and that some agencies and some social workers may be able to implement the standards only gradually. Although generally comprehensive, the standards do not deal with the specialized areas of expertise required for social work with diverse groups of adolescents such as those in gangs, substance abusers, and pregnant or parenting youths.

NASW hopes that these standards will be useful in establishing the goals that every social worker and administrator try to achieve in their work with adolescents.

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of turbulence, when youths go through biological, psychological, and social changes as they grow from childhood to adulthood. For many youths, rapid physical changes often outpace their social and emotional maturity, yet social expectations increase because they are viewed by some as more like adults than like children. Teenagers live in a state of ambiguity. They are usually held responsible for their actions and sometimes treated as adults, yet legally in most situations they are considered children with few rights. Adolescents strive for autonomy and self-identity, try to define their values, and increasingly rely on peers for advice, yet they are still dependent on adults. All adolescents have mood swings as they struggle with strong feelings that reflect a desire to define their goals and confusing expectations because of their conflicting needs for dependence and autonomy.

The problems adolescents experience are exacerbated by the invasion of drugs, violence, and AIDS into their homes, schools, and social environments. Many live in poor families and unhealthy environments and have no access to health care. Many are abused or neglected. Two-thirds of all runaways, for example, have been abused by a parent. Many lack exposure

to appropriate role models. Youths who have been abused, neglected, unloved, or have low self-esteem for other reasons have difficulty achieving emotional and social maturity.

Most young people become competent adults who are able to function effectively in society. They are motivated by caring adults and peers who help them to develop the knowledge and skills that they need. Of particular concern to social workers, however, are those adolescents who are at risk due to a harmful or nonsupportive environment and behaviors such as dropping out of school, using drugs and alcohol, committing status offenses (activities that would not be against the law for an adult), engaging in delinquent activities, having unprotected sexual activity, and attempting suicide.

Social workers who work with youths and their families often face scarce resources, limited alternatives if the adolescent must leave home, and an unwillingness of some traditional institutions to work with the adolescents' families. Social workers may have ambivalent feelings about the youths because their behaviors and attitudes may make the social workers uncomfortable.

Historically, the social work profession has advocated for the rights of children and youths. The NASW Bill of Rights for Children and Youths[1] clearly encourages society to provide opportunities for children and youths to develop their full potential at each stage of development.

These Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Adolescents are designed to guide social workers in a variety of settings as they help adolescents become competent and productive adults. To do so, adolescents must have a safe environment, adequate health care, an education that meets the individual needs of each youth, opportunities to develop skills, constructive outlets for leisure time, legal protection and redress, and the right to needed services. They must be exposed to healthy adults who model healthy decision-making skills on a consistent basis. They also should have opportunities for decision making and for participation in the design and delivery of services.

As the professional organization of social workers, NASW is concerned that social work with adolescents be carried out by people who have the necessary knowledge, competence, and values. Thus, NASW establishes standards to define and describe professional practice. Standards alone, however, cannot improve the quality of practice unless they are disseminated and implemented at the practice level and unless core knowledge requirements are learned in schools of social work. Such standards may only be effective if social workers

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[1]Adopted by the Delegate Assembly, 1975; reconfirmed by the Delegate Assembly, August 1990.

have the basic resources necessary to accomplish their mission. Commitment by social work practitioners, educators, and administrators to use these standards and to advocate for needed resources will result in a better opportunity for adolescents to reach their full potential and for society to prepare its future leaders and work force.

Besides establishing standards for work with specific populations, NASW identifies the ethical responsibilities of all social workers with respect to themselves, their clients, and their colleagues through the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Adherence to this code assures that social workers will continue their professional development through continuing professional education and community service. These standards, therefore, supplement the *Code of Ethics*.

Standards for the Practice of Social Work with Adolescents

Standard 1

Social workers shall demonstrate knowledge and understanding of adolescent development.

Interpretation

Essential areas of knowledge about positive adolescent development include:

- human growth and behavior, including developmental stages, human needs, motivations, feelings, behaviors, activities of children and youths, and cultural differences
- the role of adolescence in the individual's social, physical, emotional, and sexual growth from birth to adulthood, including the adolescent's striving for and ambivalence about independence, competence, achievement, personal identity, and sexuality
- the impact of the educational process, substance abuse, and violence on adolescents' development and on their families
- the family, school, community, and cultural processes for allowing and helping adolescents move toward independence
- the importance of opportunities for adolescents to establish positive relationships with open expression of thoughts and feelings with family members, peers, and adult role models such as teachers, clergy, sports team coaches, and so forth
- the value of establishing an identity, which may include a natural form of rebelliousness and rejection of authority.

Standard 2

Social workers shall demonstrate an understanding of and ability to assess the needs of adolescents; access social institutions, organizations, and resources within a community that provide services for adolescents and their families; and advocate for the development of needed resources.

Interpretation

Social workers should work toward the following fundamental knowledge to work effectively with adolescents and their families:

- the history and development of social work and its emphasis on the person-in-environment perspective
- the interrelationship among the individual and the family, the group, the neighborhood, the community, and societal systems
- the purpose, structure, legal mandates, and services provided by public and voluntary social welfare agencies; child welfare agencies; youth services agencies; schools; and health, mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement organizations
- an ability to coordinate with other professionals and community organizations and advocate for their involvement on behalf of youths
- political and economic factors affecting adolescents, their families, and their communities (for example, standards of living and access to health care and services)
- the theory, principles, and methods of social work, including casework, group work, community organization, administration, supervision, planning, and research
- the influence of cultural beliefs, background, and lifestyles
- multidisciplinary and team approaches to working with children and youths, and the importance of specific contributions from the biological, psychological, social sciences, legal, educational, law enforcement, and other disciplines
- opportunities available to adolescents to obtain training and increase job-related skills
- an understanding of the importance of working with adolescents in nontraditional environments in which adolescents feel comfortable
- familiarity with ways to provide peer education and increase youth decision-making and leadership skills
- an understanding and ability to develop jointly a case plan with youths and their families
- an understanding of how to develop programs that provide comprehensive services to adolescents to prevent

fragmentation and increase the likelihood that adolescents will use available services. (All such comprehensive programs should include prevention and treatment services for HIV and AIDS.)

Standard 3

Social workers shall demonstrate knowledge and understanding of family dynamics.

Interpretation

Essential areas of knowledge about family dynamics include:

- knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of family dynamics in all types of families (for example, two-parent, single-parent, foster care, adoptive, unrelated individuals living together as a family, and so forth)[2]
- the impact of the parent's own growth experiences, parental attitudes, and behaviors and culturally relevant ways for a parent to ask for help
- an understanding of how to bring about changes in family functioning
- the concept of family culture, including the role of the family in meeting the changing physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional needs of adolescents
- cultural attitudes toward the responsibilities of each family member
- the impact of impairment and disability, including mental and emotional disabilities, chemical dependency, and abusive conditions, on positive adolescent development and family dynamics
- an understanding of changing parental roles and the diversity among those roles
- the impact of economic, social, and cultural conditions on parental ability to meet family responsibilities.

Standard 4

Social workers shall demonstrate acceptance of and contribute to the development and maintenance of culturally competent[3] service delivery.

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[2]NASW defines *families* as two or more people who consider themselves "family" and who assume obligations, functions, and responsibilities generally essential to healthy family life.

[3]*Culturally competent* is defined here as service delivery that takes into consideration cultural beliefs, traditions, and ways of life in the development of a service plan.

Interpretation

Social workers who work with adolescents shall learn and demonstrate an understanding of the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the adolescents and coworkers with whom they work, regardless of the adolescents' lifestyle, origin, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or behavior. Social workers shall seek to ameliorate any of their attitudes and practices that may interfere with their ability to offer culturally competent, equitable, and effective services.

Social workers must understand how to help adolescents establish culturally relevant goals (which may differ from those of adults), so they may achieve success and advocate for culturally relevant opportunities to achieve those goals.

Essential areas of responsibility in the development and maintenance of culturally competent service delivery include:

- advocating for equitable and effective treatment of minority youths in the service delivery system and equitable access to services and treatment for youths
- advocating for equitable and effective treatment of youths on the basis of gender differences in the service delivery system and for equitable access to needed services and treatment for youths
- advocating for equitable and effective treatment of youths with different sexual orientations and behaviors and for equitable access to needed services and treatment for youths
- advocating for equitable and effective treatment of youths that takes into consideration cultural beliefs, traditions, and ways of life
- advocating for bilingual staff to meet the needs of youths whose primary language is not English.

Standard 5

Social workers shall possess or have access to specialized knowledge of the legal, regulatory, and administrative requirements and resources for youths and their families.

Interpretation

Legislative, regulatory, and administrative requirements vary greatly by target population and by state. The resources available to serve different groups of youths vary by state and locality. Social workers must understand the requirements and how to help youths within those requirements, including:

- state legislation pertaining to child abuse and neglect and the custody, guardianship, and adoption of children and adolescents

- state juvenile justice legislation and laws governing the emancipation and incarceration of minors, including options available to divert status offenders from the juvenile justice system
- legal definitions of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect; legal mandates for state protection of children and youths; conditions under which the state exercises these mandates; legal basis for recognition of neglect or abuse by the juvenile court; and alternatives available to the court for youths who have been adjudicated as abused or neglected
- legal definitions of eligibility for emancipation and for adjudication requiring that youths be incarcerated and the services/alternatives available to help those youths
- specific state licensure standards or requirements that may impose additional mandates, including policies on HIV and AIDS
- function and responsibilities of court personnel, law enforcement agencies, and correctional institutions for youths and their families
- intervention options within the framework of the law and available programs
- mental health commitment procedures
- educational rights, responsibilities, and alternatives
- options available to adolescents for redress against violations of rights
- effective ways to advocate for training for personnel
- how to work together with a wide range of providers and other professionals.

Standard 6

Social workers shall strive to empower adolescents.

Interpretation

Social workers should have the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the participation of and to actively encourage the decision-making skills of adolescents to empower those with whom they work. This includes:

- encouraging youths and their families to be active participants and working with them jointly in their own case planning
- developing adolescent leaders to provide peer support to other adolescents
- advocating for youth positions on agency boards or committees and helping youths develop the skills to serve effectively and to improve existing services and develop necessary services that are absent

- working with youths and their families to help them assume responsibility for following through on a plan of action and for securing and using planned services
- when appropriate, helping youths develop independent living skills.

Standard 7

Social workers shall advocate for an understanding of the needs of adolescents and for resources and cooperation among professionals and agencies to meet those needs.

Interpretation

In appearance, adolescents resemble adults more than they do children, and too often they are treated as adults. Because adolescents are often defiant in their striving for independence, some adults and service organizations believe that adolescents do not want their help. The behaviors and attitudes of the youths may provoke ambivalent feelings among service providers. Yet research shows that appropriate opportunities and interventions will help adolescents become and remain healthy productive citizens. Social workers must advocate on behalf of all adolescents with whom they work, but particularly on behalf of adolescents in cases of disputed custody, foster care placement, independent living planning, and other instances in which a court determines where the youth will be placed. Social workers have an obligation to advocate for the adolescents with whom they work to ensure:

- a plan for developing and maintaining needed community services in the least restrictive environment that is responsive to an assessment of adolescents' needs and includes adolescent participation in the planning process, with adolescence defined as a developmental period that may last into the youth's 20s
- continuing education for providers and professionals to ensure increased understanding of and willingness to work with adolescents and their families and to empower youths to assume decision-making and leadership roles
- agency willingness to help staff recognize and take appropriate actions to resolve their own biases and feelings of fear or antipathy (for example, for youths who have been on the street or who may be violent)
- the changing of policies or the development of public policies to meet the needs of youths
- the ability of social workers to create, advocate for, and maintain environments in which youths can be safe.

Standard 8

Social workers shall participate in multidisciplinary case consultation across agencies that provide services to adolescents and their families.

Interpretation

To develop the most appropriate case plan with adolescents and their families, social workers must consult with the other individuals, professionals, and organizations who work with those adolescents. Social workers may also benefit from such consultations when a case is closed to reassess the way a case plan was developed and what was successful and unsuccessful, particularly if the youth did not achieve the desired outcome. Care must be taken not to violate confidentiality in this consultation (see Standard 9). Such consultation should include:

- joint assessment of youth and family strengths, risk factors, and presenting problems
- joint assessment of the potential use of available services and interventions
- individual evaluations of the adolescent's progress and joint consultation following the evaluations
- joint appraisal of the youth's successes and failures when the case is closed and assessment of alternatives that were available for the case plan.

Standard 9

Social workers shall maintain confidentiality in their relationship with youths and of the information obtained within that relationship.

Interpretation

Respect for the client as a person and for the client's right to privacy underlies the social worker–client relationship. Although assurance of confidentiality enhances the relationship and the willingness of the youth to develop and adhere to a case plan, the youth should be advised that there are circumstances in which confidentiality cannot be maintained. Certain programs require that parents or guardians be notified that the youth is residing in a short-term residential facility. Suspicion of child abuse or neglect requires that appropriate authorities be notified. Social workers must also disclose information necessary to avert danger to the youth or to others. In all such situations, the social worker shall advise the youth of the exceptions to confidentiality and privilege, shall be prepared to share with the youth the information that is being reported, and shall handle the feelings evoked. Except for federal, state, or local legal and other overriding requirements,

the social worker will share information only with the informed and signed consent of the youth, the family, or both.

Standard 10

Social workers shall assume an active role in contributing to the improvement and quality of the work environment, agency policies and practices with clients, and their own professional development.

Interpretation

Social workers are responsible, in part, for their own empowerment as staff of the organizations in which they work. As integral members of an agency, social workers who work with adolescents are to conform to the expectations established by that agency. Social workers should initiate action to ensure that agency policies and practices establish reasonable expectations that allow them to perform their jobs most effectively. They must work for constructive change so that the work environment allows them to meet youths' needs and derive the support that they need to do so. Social workers must be responsible for remaining prepared for their duties in the provision of social work services by seeking relevant continuing education and training programs and competent supervision. They should assume responsibility for helping their colleagues by sharing their knowledge and skills. They should collect information to document the need for changes in agency policy, practices, or the availability of continuing education and training and discuss the information with agency management.

Standards for Administrators of Youth Services Agencies

Standard 11

The administrators of youth services agencies shall establish the environment, policies, procedures, and guidelines necessary for effective social work practice with adolescents.

Interpretation

The administrator is responsible for assuring an environment that is supportive of staff both through a supportive work environment and through advocacy to ensure that the workers' concerns are addressed within the agency and with other agencies that should cooperatively serve the same adolescent

populations. The administrator is also responsible for ensuring that the agency is responsive to the needs of the youths and their families. Some of the ways in which the administrator must meet these requirements include:

- development of public education materials and participation in public discussions to ensure public support for the goals of the program
- development of interagency agreements to ensure collaboration among those who serve the same adolescent population
- establishment of operational policies and procedures for dealing with specific problems such as suspected parental abuse, abuse within a previous residential setting, treatment of substance abuse problems, and treatment of HIV and AIDS
- development of personnel policies and recruitment activities to ensure a diverse staff and pluralism in the agency
- establishment of a safe and secure working environment, with measures to protect staff from violent youths and family members and from violence in the surrounding area
- provision of systematic administrative and evaluative reviews of the program and opportunities for board members (including youths) and staff to participate in the development of program policies
- when hiring social work staff, adherence to hiring those with bachelor of social work or master of social work degrees from accredited programs, those with demonstrated work skills, and those with characteristics that reflect the ethnic composition of the clientele served by the agency
- adherence to clearly written job descriptions and affirmative action and other personnel policies, including grievance procedures
- program evaluation by youths and their families, funding sources, and other community agencies and referral sources.

Standard 12

The administrators of youth services agencies shall advocate for an increased understanding of the needs of youths, policy changes and adequate resources to enable social workers to meet those needs, and appropriate working conditions for the workers.

Interpretation

To fulfill this standard, the administrator is expected to:

- solicit and allocate program funds and resources sufficient to respond to emergency, short-term, and longer term needs of youths and their families

- provide opportunities for youths to participate in the design and implementation of service programs
- provide access to transportation and individual telephone lines to ensure that social work staff may help youths and their families access needed services that will support family reunification or contribute to the adolescent's preparation for independence
- employ sufficient staff to work with all youth clients and their families
- establish and disseminate reasonable and published work loads for staff
- provide appropriate and adequate supervision and the opportunities for multidisciplinary consultation services
- provide opportunities and time for staff development and continuing education experiences on the basis of an agency assessment of training needs
- establish a salary schedule that is appropriate with regard to the social worker's education, work experience, and job responsibilities and that is consistent with NASW guidelines
- provide liability protection for the agency and the staff
- advocate for public policies on the local, state, and national levels that support the goals and client population of the agency.

Code of Ethics

SUMMARY OF MAJOR PRINCIPLES

I. The Social Worker's Conduct and Comportment as a Social Worker

A. *Propriety.* The social worker should maintain high standards of personal conduct in the capacity or identity as social worker.

B. *Competence and Professional Development.* The social worker should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions.

C. *Service.* The social worker should regard as primary the service obligation of the social work profession.

D. *Integrity.* The social worker should act in accordance with the highest standards of professional integrity.

E. *Scholarship and Research.* The social worker engaged in study and research should be guided by the conventions of scholarly inquiry.

II. The Social Worker's Ethical Responsibility to Clients

F. *Primacy of Clients' Interests.* The social worker's primary responsibility is to clients.

G. *Rights and Prerogatives of Clients.* The social worker should make every effort to foster maximum self-determination on the part of clients.

H. *Confidentiality and Privacy.* The social worker should respect the privacy of clients and hold in confidence all information obtained in the course of professional service.

I. *Fees.* When setting fees, the social worker should ensure that they are fair, reasonable, considerate, and commensurate with the service performed and with due regard for the clients' ability to pay.

III. The Social Worker's Ethical Responsibility to Colleagues

J. *Respect, Fairness, and Courtesy.* The social worker should treat colleagues with respect, courtesy, fairness, and good faith.

K. *Dealing with Colleagues' Clients.* The social worker has the responsibility to relate to the clients of colleagues with full professional consideration.

IV. The Social Worker's Ethical Responsibility to Employers and Employing Organizations

L. *Commitments to Employing Organizations.* The social worker should adhere to commitments made to the employing organizations.

V. The Social Worker's Ethical Responsibility to the Social Work Profession

M. *Maintaining the Integrity of the Profession.* The social worker should uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession.

N. *Community Service.* The social worker should assist the profession in making social services available to the general public.

O. *Development of Knowledge.* The social worker should take responsibility for identifying, developing, and fully utilizing knowledge for professional practice.

VI. The Social Worker's Ethical Responsibility to Society

P. *Promoting the General Welfare.* The social worker should promote the general welfare of society.

This summary is of the NASW Code of Ethics, effective July 1, 1980, as adopted by the 1979 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 1990 Delegate Assembly. The complete text, including the preamble and expanded definitions of principles, is available on request.

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About NASW

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest organization of professional social workers in the world. As of December 1992, more than 145,000 members participated in 55 chapters throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the international community.

The association works to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies. NASW provides a variety of membership benefits including credentials and insurance (professional liability, health, and life). The NASW Press produces *Social Work* and the *NASW News* as membership benefits, as well as three other journals and several books each year as a major service in professional development. In January 1991, the association released a major proposal for National Health Care, a single-payer system.

For more information on NASW membership or programs, write NASW, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241 (telephone: 1-800-638-8799 or 1-202-408-8600).